

Blood Work

Inspired by vampires and armed with *Half-Life 2*'s engine, Troika Games is creating what may be a *Diablo*-sized blockbuster RPG.

Some game developers have a high sense of self-importance. Leonard Boyarsky, joint CEO and art director at Troika Games, is not one of those people.

"I guarantee you that more than 50 percent of the excitement about our *Vampire* game has nothing to do with Troika or the license—it's the *Half-Life 2* engine," he admits.



Boyarsky isn't about to complain. He knows that by using the *Half-Life 2* technology, Troika will be able to attract a whole new audience to its next role-playing game, *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*. "This game is a big experiment for us," Boyarsky says. "We hope to take sales for an RPG to a whole new level."

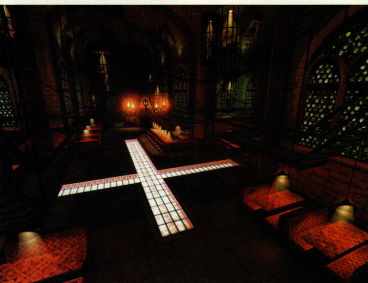
Boyarsky's dream to hit it big with *Vampire* is understandable. Troika, a small, 35-person company based in Orange County, California, commands a lot of respect among a hardcore crowd of RPG fanatics, but breakout success has thus far eluded the three-year-old company. It was co-founded by Boyarsky, Tim Cain, and Jason Andersen, the core team responsible for *Fallout*, a cult-hit RPG published by Interplay before the three broke away to form Troika. To date, Troika's games have been heralded for innovative design work, but have appealed mostly to a hardcore niche that doesn't mind isometric 2D graphics and copious onscreen text.

Vampire, though, should change the stakes. Thanks to *Half-Life 2*'s technology, Troika's leading-edge design can now be married to spectacular graphics and 3D characters that can talk, express emotions, and yes, even expose their fangs.

Half-Life 2's technology will sex up *Vampire*'s visual look, yet Boyarsky promises the game will feel very much like past Troika RPGs. "Our designs always have multiple solutions to quests, and *Vampire* will be no different," he says, highlighting the open-ended nature of Troika's games. Another tenet of Troika's design philosophy is letting players create their own character. "A game like *Planetscape: Torment* gives you a character to play, but we always make our RPGs so you can define your own character," Boyarsky says.

No game demonstrated Troika's open-ended design philosophy more than *Arcanum*. Released in 2001, it was Troika's first game. Set in a 19th-century Victorian world in the midst of an industrial revolution, *Arcanum* met with good reviews, though not raves, and reasonable sales. Looking back on the project, Boyarsky says Troika may have taken its open-ended design too far. "That game was so open-ended we couldn't even test all the possibilities," he admits. Going forward, Boyarsky knows the company has to balance an open-ended design against what will make the best game experience. "No matter what, we have to make sure the choices a player makes in the game will lead to a fun experience," he says.

After *Arcanum*, Troika was hoping to refine the game's design with a sequel. But those plans fell by the wayside when Sierra, *Arcanum*'s publisher, unceremoniously cancelled the sequel. "Sierra just called us up and pulled the rug out from under



us," Boyarsky recalls. Then, as if to add insult to injury, Troika had another project cancelled: a *Lord of the Rings* role-playing game that was shelved because of legal issues.

"Those really were the darkest days for us," Boyarsky remembers. For a while, it seemed like Troika's days as a small development shop might be numbered. "We never missed a payroll, but when I look back on it, I'm not sure how we made that happen."

But as the old saying goes, the sky is often darkest before the dawn. Right when things seemed the worst, Atari called and asked Troika to develop *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG that was released in September. And soon there was another iron in the fire: Valve Software agreed to license Troika its still-in-development *Half-Life 2* technology. While Troika

had never created a fully-3D game, Boyarsky says the entire company was energized by the creative possibilities of working in 3D. "There's just so much more you can do in terms of storytelling in 3D," he said.

Armed with the *Half-Life 2* technology, Troika signed a deal with Activision for *Vampire*, a first-person game based on White Wolf's popular pen-and-paper RPG world. *Vampire* is a departure for Troika, but Boyarsky insists they are making a true RPG, not just an action game masquerading as an RPG. "After this we will know if you can make a serious RPG that has blockbuster potential," he suggests.

What's more, the game will test whether Troika has what it takes to become a blockbuster studio like Blizzard or id Software. Boyarsky admits such acclaim would be nice, but at the same time, he's proud that Troika has a reputation for crafting solid role-playing games. "At least we didn't have to turn to making Barbie games to stay in business," he jokes. That's one open-ended game design we're happy not to have seen. *z*

Set in the seedy Los Angeles of the night, *Bloodlines* brings a new dimension to RPG games—the life of a vampire.



The Troika Timeline

1997 Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain, and Jason Anderson meet success developing Interplay's cult RPG hit *Fallout*. A rabid fan base follows.

2000 Troika Games releases its first game, the RPG *Arcanum*, for Sierra. The game is met with solid reviews and reasonable sales.

2002 Troika goes back to their roots as they work with Atari to release *Dungeons & Dragons: The Temple of Elemental Evil*.

2003 Armed with Valve's powerful Source engine, will Troika take RPGs to the next level with *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*? The forecast looks good.

